

#174 LEO SIENKIEWICZ: ARMY AIR CORPS (WHEELER)

Chris Conybeare (CC): . . . North Carolina, and my name is . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

CC: . . . at about ten-thirty a.m. Mr. Sienkiewicz lives in Pfaffton, North Carolina . . .

Leo Sienkiewicz (LS): Pfaffton.

CC: . . . and my name is Chris Conybeare, and Dan Martinez is assisting me with the interview.

We're going to start this the way we start almost every other interview. Can you state your name and rank on December 7, 1941?

LS: Well that's not hard. My name is Leo Sienkiewicz, I was a Staff Sergeant in the United States Army Air Corps.

CC: And where were you stationed?

LS: Wheeler Field.

CC: You'd been in for a while, though. How long had you been in Hawaii actually?

LS: Nine months before the war broke out.

CC: And how long had you been in the service all together?

LS: Eight years.

CC: At that time?

LS: No, at that time, four years.

CC: Four years.

LS: Yeah, four years during the war.

CC: Do you remember what you were doing and how you learned that an attack was taking place? Can you describe what was going on that Sunday morning?

LS: Yeah. Being in the Air Corps, we came off maneuvers Saturday. We cleaned up, had an inspection Saturday morning. Everything was locked up for the weekend. And it was sort of our weekend off. And Saturday afternoon, three of us went to Honolulu, because we always figured between the first and the tenth, the Army got paid or the Navy got paid, and in between is the least amount of people downtown. So we took that weekend off to come downtown, to have dinner and see a movie, hit a bar and go back.

CC: Do you remember where you had dinner, or . . .

LS: The only -- it's in Waikiki. I don't know the restaurant. The only thing I know is the bar, the American bar, downtown Honolulu.

CC: So you, first, you went out and you had dinner.

LS: Yes.

CC: What kind of food would you like to -- did you like to get away from the military chow? What would you look forward to?

LS: No, just the opposite.

CC: Yeah?

LS: Yeah. The military chow was ideal.

CC: Was it?

LS: Oh yes. I really enjoyed it. It was good. The civilian food was hamburgers, milk shakes. That was our big meal. Although, that night, I know we all had steak, because we always liked to go out once in a while and splurge, and that's when we splurged.

CC: And then you saw a movie?

LS: We saw a movie, but I couldn't tell you the name of it.

CC: And where was the theater located, the movie theater?

LS: On Waikiki Beach.

CC: And afterwards, you stopped where?

LS: Down at the American bar in Honolulu, on the way back to the field.

CC: And was it a crowded place, or was it just a place . . .

LS: Not so crowded. We got in there and there was a booth for three of us, so we were there around, oh, almost two hours. And not many people, that's why we always picked the weekends between pays.

CC: Did they have music at the bar?

LS: Oh yes.

CC: What kind, live?

LC: No, box, jukebox music.

CC: What kinds of music did you like to listen to? What was popular?

LS: The jitterbug was popular, Tommy Dorsey, slow-moving fox-trot type music. "Green Eyes" was real popular at that time. Amapola was a big one. And you'd hear that over and over again. Guys would be putting in money to hear that.

And it was soothing, relaxing. With a couple beers, you couldn't go wrong.
(Chuckles)

CC: What time did you get home?

LS: Well, we got back to Wheeler Field two o'clock in the morning, and all of us stayed in the same barracks. So all we'd done was park the car and went upstairs in our various rooms, and we were all staff sergeants at the time, so we all had private rooms. And we all went to bed until that morning. I got up -- there was two of us in a room -- I got up and I asked the other sergeant -- Bishop was his name -- "Hey, you're gonna go to church?"

He says, "Nah, you go for me. Say a prayer." Just joking.

I said, "Okay."

So I went to washroom, came back and started to get dressed, then all of a sudden, that's when the Japanese attacked.

CC: How'd you first know that that was going on? What happened?

LS: I didn't. None of us did, because I wasn't in -- I was in the barracks, but I had a private room, like I said. So I could look outside to the window, it was real easy. And at first, when I heard an explosion, I said, "Good grief, what happened now?"

And I thought a plane blew up, a tanker blew up. Sunday morning, ten minutes to eight, it's real quiet, no activity. And I said, "Good grief, what happened? Something blew up?"

And the sergeant next to me, he said, "Nah," he said, "it's the Navy, dropping bombs, playing jokes on us."

This is what we done. It sounds funny that we'd blame the Navy. When we'd go on maneuvers, we would sort of dive bomb the Navy installations, to wake 'em up early in the morning, because we had to get up three, four o'clock in the morning for gunnery. So we figured, well, what the heck, let's wake them up. They would pull the same stunt on us. They would go on maneuvers, or gunnery, whatever it is. Then they would buzz Wheeler Field, to wake us up. That was fun. That was to break the tension a little bit. And we thought it was the Navy. We said, "Oh you--" and we swore a little bit.

All of a sudden, another bomb went off. Now, this one I saw dropped, the next barracks to me. Puff of smoke went up and I got scared, and I said, "Where's my gas mask?"

Now, I didn't know that this was an attack yet. I had no idea. But I saw smoke, and I figured, first thing I see smoke, I'm gonna get my gas mask. Then I'm looking for gas mask, I said, "I got no shoes on." So I started looking for my shoes. I get my shoes and gas mask, started to run out, and I said, "My gosh, I don't have my dog tag."

This is --- you're trained for four years to always have your gas mask and, you know, so I went back, and sure enough, that room was blown up.

CC: Your room?

LS: Right. I was only fifty feet away. It was blown up and the door was right over my bunk, squashed down. I never went back in that room for my dog tag. I got scared and then I looked out and there is a Japanese plane coming, about eye level. We're on third floor, just about eye level. And I didn't think it was Japanese at first. I saw the rising sun insignia, 'til I saw the Japanese helmet, a pilot, I didn't know it was Japanese or what. But it just gave me an idea, he had a helmet on, he was serious behind that, in a cockpit, and he got the insignia and I figured, "Good grief, we're being attacked by the Japanese army." I didn't know what it was. I said army.

And I ran in the barracks, I said, "Take cover fellas, take cover fellas."

And I was going from the third floor to the second floor, and down to the first floor. And my first intention was get out of the barracks, they're bombing it. Actually they were bombing the airplanes. The airplanes were lined up like sitting ducks, back, tail to tail, rows of it.

CC: How close were they to the barracks, the planes?

LS: Oh, around 300 feet, 350 feet in, just about there. And I was going to run out of the barracks, into the woods. And I got to the door and I looked out, and I saw real fat guys getting behind a tree, about three or four inches in diameter, trying to protect themselves, when the Japanese were strafing us. They dropped the bombs already on Pearl Harbor and were coming back and strafing us. This was after the bombing and I never went out and I went . . . and I . . . well, I don't know. We were trained always to go, never go against a wall for protection, go in the inner wall. So I picked a concrete block inner wall and I lay there for twenty minutes. I thought it was twenty hours. 'Til all the bombing was over, then I went out. And lucky I didn't, the guys went out got strafed and got killed.

CC: And when you went out, what did you find? Did you go to try to . . .

LS: Well, the first thing I --- this was, I was trying to run out the front to get out of the barracks. And when the bombing was stopped, I went to the back to get to the field. First thing we wanted to do is get some airplanes up in flight. And we ran to the --- this was, oh, a good half mile from us, our airplanes, from where we were. And after I got there, although being twenty-two years old and seasoned a little bit, I saw, oh, approximately 150 airplanes in flames. And I started to cry, because that's all I knew, air force, air combat, air everything, and here we had nothing to fly with. So we went in there and started to separate the airplanes, the burning airplanes from the good ones and salvage what we could. And then, in the meantime, the Japanese came back from bombing Pearl Harbor, and started to strafe us. 'Cause they had an open field, they just came down and just sort of rocking their plane back and forth, and strafing us. And we took cover again. And how dumb, I went to a tent. That's how scared we were.

The second time, I really got scared. I realized what really was going on. We were at war with Japan. Why, I don't know. This is something we never heard of, war. But just to give you a little idea why I cried was nine months before this happened, I came over on the USS *LEXINGTON*, with fifty P-40s. That

was going to be the reinforcement for island of Oahu, update the aircraft. This was the Army Air Corps. And my outfit, sad as we were, we never got a plane up to help the cause.

CC: Do you remember why the planes were deployed the way they were, why they had them lined up the way they were lined up? Do you remember that? Was there any reason for why they would . . .

LS: Sure, there was a stupid reason. And I blamed our officers for that, the whole, I don't know, from the general down. You never do that. You never leave airplanes together in the --- at that time, we called it the States, because Hawaii here was a territory. You'd never leave airplanes in a bunch or in a group. You always disperse 'em over a weekend, or a holiday, or anything like that. When I went over there, every Saturday we have inspection, they put 'em tail to tail, in a straight line, next to the hangars. I said, "What do you do this for? You're not supposed to do this."

Well, I'm nobody, just a little guy down there, and they said, "Well, that's how it's done."

I said, "During any kind of maneuvers or anything, they always tell us put 'em in bunkers or put 'em alongside of a field or something like that. But never put 'em together. Never," I said, "that, that -- it never works."

And I just said that. I was not realizing I was saying something that made sense. I never realized that we were going to be attacked, and that was going to be our downfall at Wheeler Field.

CC: Did anybody ever say why they did it? Did you ever find out what . . .

LS: No.

CC: . . . they were thinking?

LS: To make it look pretty for inspection. To give us room to march around, yes. Because the field is small, and where we had inspection. So if you put all the airplanes together, each squadron, lined 'em up like that, then you can march and inspect, do whatever you want between 'em.

Dan Martinez (DM): There was also a directive from General Shore, suspecting possible sabotage, that they also put those planes out there, but are you saying that this was done way before that . . .

LS: This was a routine thing. Sabotage was something else. We had guards out there for sabotage. We had regular patrols. The ironic thing was, the week before, or the week of, well, that week, we were on maneuvers Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Friday we got called back in the Wheeler Field for inspection. So there was something, we didn't know what it was. It never trickled down to us why we were on maneuvers that week, but we were on alert.

CC: Just didn't bother to consult you about it?

LS: Well, no . . .

(Chuckling)

LS: I don't think a lot of other people were consulted, notified or anything like that.

DM: The --- there's a story that has persisted over the years that seems to be proved untrue, that the planes fly from the Kolekole Pass. In order to attack Wheeler Air Field, they had to turn in towards the base of the mountains, we understand, and come down and fly by. Is that your recollection? Or what were your recollections on how the planes attacked the field?

LS: They came --- well, they came between the two ranges of the mountains, over the Pass.

DM: Did you see that?

LS: We saw 'em going back.

DM: But you didn't see . . .

LS: We didn't see 'em come in. No. The first plane I saw was when I looked out the window.

DM: Which direction was that?

LS: Oh, it was right on our base, attacking our base.

DM: Was it coming from the Waianae Mountains, or coming down from the valley, or . . .

LS: No, it was --- second wave came from the valley, from the right. I don't know what range of mountains that is. Looking at the field, from the barracks, it came from the right. They were coming from the right. I couldn't tell you what direction now.

CC: What happened after the attack? What kinds of things took place that afternoon and that evening? What kinds of things were you starting to do?

LS: Well, like I said, we were down the field, trying to get the airplanes separated, try to salvage what we could, which we did all afternoon. They told us not to go to the barracks that night because there's a chance of being attacked again. They didn't tell us where to go and I figure, "I'll hit the woods and stay in the woods." And it was pretty cold and started to rain a little bit. And I said, "I'm not going to sleep like this any more."

Next morning, I go into the barracks, try to get something to eat and they said, "No, the food is poisoned, the water is poisoned."

That's true. That's ours. And so, okay, that's Monday.

Just to come back a little bit, I had a hangover Sunday morning. A little one, but I had a hangover. And after the attack and everything, it was a big hangover, because I was sick and upset and everything else. And Monday, sleeping in the woods there, I got up, I still had a hangover. But I think I was hungry and scared more than anything. And I'll never forget that hangover, and I only drink beer, so I wasn't, I don't blame the beer or anything like --

Primo, I think, was the name of it, if I'm not mis-- I never drink that any more. (Chuckles)

Anyway, Tuesday, Monday we went back on a field, because that was our duty, to get the planes ready, which we worked all day and they said, "No food, everything is poisoned. Be ready for attack."

Now this, I'm talking about Wheeler Field. And then I figured the second night, I'm going to go where it's warm to sleep. I went to church. It was open.

CC: And you sacked out in the church?

LS: I did. And the slightest noise you hear, an airplane or anything, you jump up. And I wanted to get out of the building. It's bad to be in a building during an attack, obviously. Get out in the woods, or just in the open is better than being in the building. I figured they're not going to bomb a church, you know, I was trying to think smart. But anyway, we never had a return attack.

CC: Was there a lot of, I mean, were people shooting at things moving in the night and stuff? Did you have sentries . . .

LS: That's a story in itself. They shot at anything that moved, anything that made a noise. I don't care if it was an airplane, it's an animal or a human being. You just didn't want to move around at night because everybody was trigger-happy. We --- Navy was flying over from a mission. This is Monday night. Our own people shooting at 'em. Not knowing -- I mean, we were shooting at our own B-17's that were coming Sunday morning.

CC: Did any of those B-17's try to land at Wheeler?

LS: Oh yeah, they did.

CC: Do you remember that?

LS: Yeah, oh yeah. See, I was familiar with B-17's because where I came from, Langley Field, Virginia, we had B-17's. These people here never knew what a B-17 looked like, because they only had B-18's, or B-10's, but B-18's were the most popular airplanes. The B-17 was a very, very sophisticated airplane, beautiful airplane. And they were coming in, lumbering into Wheeler Field, because they were told to get out of Hickam. They were going to land at Hickam and they were coming over to our place. I think they were dispersed to go all over the island. They were told where to go. And they were coming in, this is broad daylight, Sunday morning. I was on the field, like I said, trying to separate airplanes, and I said, "Gosh, B-17's."

They said, "What's that?"

I said, "That's one of our newest bombers."

I didn't know why it was coming into a fighter field. I had no idea, other than . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

LS: . . . our pilots, because we had no airplanes.

DM: But they came out of Haleiwa.

LS: Yeah, they were on gunnery that week. And they came to Wheeler. And they jump in planes . . .

CC: Why don't we . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

CC: . . . to go back there, while this was going on, you observed some P-40's that came into Wheeler, or what?

LS: At one end of the field, the extreme end of the field, but I didn't pay much attention to 'em, because our primary job was to try to get our planes ready to go.

CC: And you remember looking --- what did you see when you looked at the other end of the field? What kind of aircraft were they?

LS: Well, I was very familiar with their P-40. They were the ones that I brought over nine months ago, so the silhouette was very easy to identify. There was no question, I knew what it was. But where they came from, I had no idea. I didn't know why they came there, but they didn't take off originally from Wheeler Field. I know that.

CC: But you saw them, during the attack, you saw them come in?

LS: Oh yes, yeah.

CC: What happened? Do you remember?

LS: No, I can't tell you for sure because, well, I couldn't see.

CC: But did . . .

LS: You have to visualize, I was on one side of the field, and between them and me, there's a bunch of smoke and fire, and buildings burn-- hangars were burning, airplanes burning, and fuel -- aviation fuel -- burning. It was just smoke. You couldn't tell. At a distance, we saw 'em come in, then we seen 'em take off.

CC: Oh, you saw 'em take off.

LS: Oh yeah. But I had no idea who they were. I know they weren't our outfit.

CC: What were you thinking, though? Were you, were you . . .

LS: I was hoping we're going to get more up there. That's what we were working so furiously, trying to get things going, but we couldn't do it.

DM: During this time, what hangar were you closest to? What hangar number? Do you remember?

LS: Closest one to the main gate. Nineteenth squadron had the first hangar, we had the second hangar, which was at seventy-eight. Now, how you say numbers, one, two, three, or A, B, C, that I don't know.

DM: Thank you.

CC: And you said later, you observed some B-17s, do you know about what time that happened and what you saw?

LS: What time? We were on the field and it was after the second wave, so that would've meant after nine o'clock. Maybe it was like 9:30, quarter to ten. I'm not positive on the time because we weren't looking at time. We were looking any aircraft coming up the valley, to run in case it was a Japanese airplane, I know that. But I recognized the B-17 and most of the guys were running away from it, to be honest with you, our guys. Because they didn't recognize what it was. All they saw, a big, beautiful airplane coming in, real low. They figured, ah shoot, there's more trouble.

DM: How low?

LS: Oh gosh, this was like fifty feet. It was coming in for a landing. But we never saw airplanes come in for a landing like that. And from that direction neither.

CC: How many were there?

LS: Three.

CC: Did they get fired on?

LS: By our people? Yeah. They -- nobody hit 'em. We didn't have good marksmen in the (chuckles) Army Air Corps, I have to admit. (Chuckles)

CC: Lucky for the B-17s.

LS: Well, that and everybody else. Not only the B-17, our own Army planes, Navy planes, and civilians. Lucky for them. Half of them would be dead if they could've shot straight, if they were sharpshooters.

CC: Because everybody was just really shooting at anyone?

LS: Well, they were just shooting. I done the same thing. I knew I couldn't hit nothing, but I fired, I think, just self-preservation. I'm gonna shoot something, you know, and you shoot at it. I did, because I was -- being a staff sergeant, I had my own gun, I had my own ammunition.

DM: What kind of gun did you have?

LS: Oh, I had a forty-five at the time.

CC: So you were, you shot . . .

LS I didn't have an M-1.

CC: So you shot the forty-five at . . .

LS: Oh yeah, that's like, I don't know, throwing rice up in the air and trying to hit something, you know. It didn't have a range, it was -- close-range, it's a very powerful gun. And I was pretty good at it. I qualified with it all the time. Shooting an airplane, oh dear, that's ridiculous. But that's how life was, you have to shoot with whatever you had. Most people didn't have a gun.

CC: How did you finish the war? What . . .

LS: Oh, I went to the battle of Midway, stayed there eight months. Then I came back to the islands and spent my time in Seven Fighter Command, in the inspection department. And we were ready to go down to Iwo Jima, our outfit, and my dad had an accident with the airplane, or with a train, between him, the car, and -- anyway, he wound up in the hospital and they asked me if I could come home. And I said, "No, we're going somewhere."

And my cousin wrote, she said, "Your dad's pretty bad off. You'd better come home."

And just then, they were going to give me a commission, because they needed more officers and I had a choice to make, either come home, see my dad, or get a commission and go into battle. And I took the easy way out, I came home to see my dad.

So, not that I was scared, but I was just, I didn't see my dad for, oh, around a year and a half at the time. I just got worried, they said he was in the hospital.

CC: When you look back, forty-five years ago, how is this -- this whole event had any permanent feelings that you keep with you, or . . .

LS: Well, yeah. It left a permanent scar on me. I'm still prejudiced against the Japanese. I'm very prejudiced. I don't allow any Japanese equipment, anything, in my house, although I have a Japanese camera. When I retired, they bought me one. And, but, I use it, but I wouldn't condemn it. I don't condemn the Japanese people. I have nothing against the people themselves, but the way they went about starting this war left a bad taste in my mouth. And I doubt if I'll ever get over it.

CC: How about just the whole experience, being suddenly afraid and all that, you always -- do you think about that in other situations?

LS: Oh gosh. I still get up at night sometimes sweaty. I think, I dream, like, when I was a kid, or most every winter, like a bear is chasing you and you can't run fast enough? And eventually the bear is going to get you and you wake up, and you wake up screaming or something? Well, I had the same feelings now, but it's no bear chasing me. I think I'm going to be attacked by something, militarily. The ship is getting to be going underwater -- although I was in the Air Corps, I was on quite a few ships. I thought maybe something was going to happen to me like it was going to go sink on me.

CC: So you still have this?

LS: Oh yeah. I got -- I don't know. I'm not treated for anything, I don't care to be. That's just part of the, I don't know, December 7.

CC: Thank you.

DM: Would you like to meet with Japanese veterans to talk with them?

LC: Not necessarily.

DM: Would it be difficult for you?

LC: I got too much resentment. I don't think I'd be honest about it.

DM: So at the fiftieth anniversary, if Japanese veterans of Pearl Harbor were invited here, you'd have a problem with that?

LS: I wouldn't come there. I'll be honest with you. Never. They can come here. More power to 'em. They have nothing against me, I got nothing against them personally. But the --- I just couldn't do it. They took four years of my life here, my youth. I couldn't go to college or anything after. I could after I went back, but no, never. Meeting Japanese and all that, talking to the tourists and everything, they don't bother me. They don't bother me, I don't bother them. No, never. And I understand, that's what they're gonna do. They're gonna try to come here for the fiftieth anniversary. I'll never come here. I'd like to, but That's my personal feelings, I'm sorry, but . . .

CC: Oh, you don't have to be sorry.

LS: That's how it's going to be.

CC: That's your . . .

LS: They say I'm foolish, but I'm not. I'm just hurt. I'm scarred. I'm going to be like that.

END OF INTERVIEW